

John Kitsuse: An Appreciation

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Soon after I was invited to contribute to this special issue on John Kitsuse, I looked at several of the comments that were already in hand. I realized that my experience of John was somewhat different from that of others. Except for one academic year in the early 1960s, John and I never served on the same faculty, and the Kitsuse and Erikson families never lived in the same place. So Joanna Erikson and I were only occasionally guests in those wondrous gatherings that others here speak of so fondly—I in Evanston in the earlier years when travel brought me to the Chicago area, and the two of us in Santa Cruz in later years.

John's and my friendship, then, was formed in visits we shared in each other's home territories, in professional meetings, and in travels we undertook together. In those early years when money was tight, we often shared accommodations at meetings of the American Sociological Association and regional societies, and even during the year when both families were resident in Atlanta, he and I seemed to spend a lot of time on the road.

The notes I made to myself when I was pondering what to write here are alive with occasions and exchanges, of things said and things done, of anecdotes and stories. They all seem telling to me, although, looking back, I'm not at all sure what truth I think they tell. My notes speak of dining in New Orleans, of a journey across New England and upstate New York to lecture at a college neither of us knew anything about, of missing a flight in Austin, of John and Keith, our oldest child, carving a pumpkin for Halloween, of visits to Santa Cruz, of . . . well, of this and that.

I won't go into any of that, but I will ask your indulgence for a story that took on a new significance for me lately. One evening in the year the Kitsuses and Eriksons were living in Atlanta, 1964, John and I and a group of six or eight colleagues went out on the town to celebrate the upcoming wedding of one of us. He was African American. When it came to age and gender, our gathering was male and relatively young. When it came to ethnicity and race, however, we were a motley crew. We

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began the celebration at a black night club, which was what interracial groups did in those days before the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, but the club closed its doors at midnight and we repaired to the only after-hour restaurant in town that catered to both black and white customers. Once seated at a table, we saw that we might be in trouble. A row of surly, unsmiling white men were lined up along the bar staring at us in a way we did not take to be friendly, and one of them, looking to my skittish imagination like a coiled rattlesnake about to strike, came over to us and wanted to know what y'all doing here. We thought we knew what that query meant, and the man whose marriage we were celebrating, a shrewd veteran of Atlanta ways, said with a bright smile, "I'm going to get married." "You'll be sorry," the man replied without so much as a trace of a return smile, and shuffled back to his comrades. A muffled conversation took place over at the bar. A tense silence reigned at our table. The man returned with another question, which I heard as: "Are you guys brave?" And after a brief moment we understood. The only explanation we could come up with for the consternation we seemed to have created had to do with race. But the only explanation they could come up with for the incongruous group that had just walked through the door was that we must be Milwaukee Braves, about to become Atlanta Braves. This was the South, being dragged warily into the civil rights era. But it was also Atlanta, preparing a welcome for a new and modestly integrated baseball team. I had been shaken by this, and I thought John might have been too, but on the drive home he laughed with a sigh and said something to the effect that he had been called many names and taken for many things in his time on earth—no idle comment, that—but not once had he ever been taken for a baseball player. That has been a treasured memory of mine for 45 years, but I did not know until I read Alicia's beautiful tribute that John's father had been what we would now call a semi-professional ball player in California.

If this were an evening presentation over dinner, I would now say: "but that's not what I came here to talk about." I don't have a memory of meeting John Kitsuse. I do remember, though, that our early conversations in person and by mail (postal service, these being the olden days) had to do with the sociology of deviance. He and I had produced very similar essays on deviant behavior without being aware of each other's work. To complicate things, both of them had been published by Howard Becker during his time as Editor of *Social Problems*, and, of course, he was writing in the same general vein as well. I may be quite wrong about this—memory is not necessarily the most reliable guide in such matters—but I think the three of us (Edwin Lemert belongs somewhere in the story too) arrived at more or less the same clearing having taken quite separate paths through the underbrush. We became a "school" when other sociologists like Jack Gibbs thought what we were saying was improbable, loosely-jointed, and not very systematically argued, which was fair enough.

For a while, John and I were actively involved in planning a textbook on deviant behavior. "Actively" in this context means that we exchanged long, inconclusive memoranda on the topics we would need to cover, the research we would need to allude to, and the theories we would need to take into account. His memoranda were always longer than mine—thoughtful, mercilessly logical, full of problems that would have to be solved if we were to succeed. He had a very special kind of intellectual temperament. As we moved ahead, he could sense that we would

encounter a difficult logical snarl down the road a piece, and he wanted to make sure we were ready for it. I don't like snarls very much. My way of dealing with them was (still is) to devise some artful sentence that manages to circle around those places where problems converge and rejoin the flow of traffic on the other side. "Words, words, words," I can hear him say. John's way of handling those snarls was to encounter them head on—intently, grimly, and maybe even with a sense of satisfaction—in an effort to sort things out. He did this not because he liked or even admired that kind of intellectual task all that much, but because he thought sociological reasoning should be drawn along as clean a line as possible. We owed it to our chosen craft. This is not why the project petered out. We just lost interest along the way and turned, separately, to other matters. But it is one of the things I remember most vividly about it.

If I were asked to find a single word to describe John's mind and spirit it would have to be "sensible." That is so drab a word for so extraordinary a mind that I need to explain. I do not just mean that he was reasonable, judicious, rational, discerning—all of which he most surely was. I mean that he had a more finely tuned sociological sensibility than any of us. Most people who speak (and think in) English, and who learned to perceive reality in an American cultural setting, tend to see dots when they look out at the larger social landscape that stand for individuals and personalities and sets of motives. If all goes well, persons who specialize in the study of social life eventually learn to detect the patterns and regularities that underlie those dots and gather them into a wider complex. For most, it takes a re-education of the senses to accomplish that. It seems to me, however, that John sensed those patterns almost instinctively. Erving Goffman did too, although he was drawn to smaller, more interactive social scenes. John used to describe his thinking processes as "intuitive" when he saw and felt those connections because he could not retrace the chain of logic by which he came to deduce them, but I now think it would be fairer to conclude that he simply had an uncanny eye for the composition, the essential shape, of social things. It may be the case that he drifted into sociology by accident, but it is also the case that he was extraordinarily well suited for that line of work both intellectually and temperamentally.

I wonder now whether his respect for ritual and ceremony, his ability to make out the broad configuration of a garden or dinner table as well as of a human gathering or any other kind of social scene, were related. It was as if he could see the whole of things, the wider contour of things, better than the rest of us.

John and Joanna and I were walking down a street in Berkeley many years ago looking for a shop that specialized in Japanese paper crafts. When we found it, John's gaze was captured by a floral arrangement in the window composed of exquisitely shaped fragments of colored tissue paper. He began to explain how the overall coherence of the arrangement, its inner spirit, emerged not from the shapes of those lovely petals or even from the shadows they cast, but from the constellation; not from the particular forms, but from the formation.

After a while we thought we could see it too. But that's no surprise. We were, after all, in the presence of a master.